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Tweedy Philby, Red Superspy

THE PHILBY CONSPIRACY
By Bruce Page, David Leitch, and Philip Knightley
(Doubleday) $5.95
Reviewed by MARTIN QUIGLEY

This true traitor story could cause us to wonder, with justified apprehension, how many of our spies are really working for our enemies. One of the deadly ironies of the spy business is that the easiest governmental agencies for a spy to penetrate are the enemy's own secret intelligence agencies.

Because of the nature of the business, the only confidence that a government can have in its own spies, whom it selects for their ability to deceive, is based on, of all things, mutual trust.

"It is an obvious point that in the final analysis a spy has no protection but the faith of his friends, who must believe that no matter how far he has gone with the enemy, he remains in the end loyal."

It is thus possible, as the authors of this document make clear, for two governments to have complete confidence in the same spy whose real boss may be still another goverment and who may have access to the most secret information of all three governments.

Now consider the case of Kim Philby. An upper middleclass Englishman (a gentleman, you understand) he is the son of a father who distinguished himself in foreign service in India and the Middle East. Kim (from the Kipling stories which his father regarded as the most nourishing literary sustenance ever written) was educated in one of the traditionally best English public schools and at Cambridge. As much as any man could be, he was born into and became a part of the British Establishment. "He enjoyed its camaradie, its inside track, its comforting distaste for intellectual pyrotechnics; to the very end he remained dependent on the people he deceived."

While he was vaguely associated with a Cambridge group, which in the 30s, discussed and advocated various kinds and degrees of socialism, there was no reason to suspect that he was emotionally and intellectually ready to commit his entire life to the service of the Russian Communists. At 22, on a visit to Vienna, he met (and later married) a pretty young divorcee who "had already flung herself into work for the Communist Party." It was through her that a party agent, identity still unknown, recruited Philby as a Communist agent.

Back in England, he became a journalist in order to begin establishing an impenetrable "cover." He went to Spain and reported Franco's war against the Loyalists with such anti-Communist bias that Franco pinned a Fascist medal on him. With his friendships in the Establishment and his "pipe, flannels and old tweed jacket," which made him seem "the epitome of English reliability," it was an easy step into the Secret Intelligence Service, which he penetrated in August, 1940.

After training and a brief period as an instructor, he was assigned to the counter-espionage section, and by 1944 — in time to be of catastrophic damage to his own country and the United States — he became director of the SIS counter-Soviet department. As liaison between th SIS and the American CIA, he had access to the most important secrets of both contries.

For example, as co-director of a joint SIS-CIA operation to infiltrate Albania with anti-Communists, he helped plan and direct movements and actions which he promptly and completely reported to his Soviet masters. As a result, at least 300 anti-Communists were trapped and killed, and the English-American effort in Albania was demolished.

This detailed and fascinating documentation by a team of reporters, who work for the London Sunday Times, traces Philby's life from his birth in India to his present life as an officer of the Soviet secret service agency in Moscow, to which he defected in 1963.

The effort to explain how Philby could have betrayed his country so effectively is complicated by the fact that two of his friends at Cambridge, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, also became Soviet agents while maintaining positions of responsibility in the British government. Their personalities (obnoxious) and careers, inextricably linked with Philby's, are also portrayed in detail.

While there is no way to make an accurate assessment of the damage they did to British-American cold war efforts, the authors point out that the information of these traitors enabled the Russians, in the development of nuclear weapons, "to get the bomb years before the West expected."

The most alarming aspect of this entire story is the way these "gentlemen," whose personal morals were a matter of public scandal, were accepted so long in the inner circles of secrecy.

"It seems to us," the authors say with colossal understatement, "that the story is of some interest to those who are concerned for the security of democracy."

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(Martin Quigley is a novelist and magazine editor.)